HAVE YOU EVER SEEN A SIX-WINGED SERAPH?

May 26, 1991

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
John 3:1-8
Isaiah 6:1-8

"I saw the Lord...Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings..." -Isaiah 6:1-2 (NSRV)

Have you ever seen anything like that? I haven't. I have never seen a six-winged seraph. A former chaplain at Yale, John Vannorsdall, confesses that he hasn't either in a fine little essay from which I shamelessly took the title of this sermon. The essay is about the awkwardness most of us experience when we try to describe our personal experience of God - and the difficulty most of us have locating God in any way we can talk about.

> "Where now is the power of God in my life?" he asks. "In the forty years of my ministry I have never found the road to Damascus. I have never been blinded by heavenly light or heard my name spoken by God. I have never seen a burning bush, and where I have served the walls of the church have trembled with age, but never with the voice of God. I have never seen the six-winged seraphim." [Weavings, "In All the Old Familiar Places," March/April, 1990]

Nor have I seen anything like those seraphim, mysterious beasts with the body of a serpent, or a lion, the head of a human being, with six wings, mythical creatures of ancient mid-Eastern art depicted in attendance at the throne of the gods. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah sees them one day while taking part in a processional in the temple, which is filled with the swirling smoke of incense; looks up and sees six-winged seraphim flying around singing, antiphonally no less, "Holy, Holy, Holy!"

I've never seen anything like that and I sense that those of us who have not, have not had an identifiable religious experience, have never heard our name spoken by God, have never seen even a very small burning bush... I sense we feel deprived, or religiously anemic. There must be something about us. We're just not spiritual... Or we suspect somewhere down deep inside that people who do see things like that either have very creative imaginations or are enhancing their spirituality by smoking or ingesting illegal substances.

Furthermore, because we have not seen the six-winged seraph or anything like it, because we can't name the date and time when God spoke to us directly, we have a difficult time talking about God at all in the context of the real world. Our whole culture, in fact, has a similiar problem with intelligent, public discourse about God, caught as it is between the silliness of the televangelist who sees a 900-foot Jesus and hears a voice telling him to build a hospital - which he does against the advice of every doctor and banker in town - and now stands empty and bankrupt, and on the other hand, the arid dryness of much respectable religion which comes across with about as much passion and power as an IRS 1040 form. A friend of mine who is a teacher of preaching and who happens to be black, says that Presbyterian worship reminds him of a corporate meeting and the sermon is the chairman's report to the shareholders. So public discussion about God is difficult at best and non-existent throughout much of our culture.

The historic root of the great silence is the Enlightenment, that period in Western history when people decided that the key to understanding reality is the human mind - reason - rather than divine revelation - church dogma. It was not an easy lesson to learn. The church kept excommunicating people, throwing them in prison and burning them at the stake for suggesting things like the earth is round not flat, and the sun is at the center of the solar system and the earth revolves around the sun, not vice versa.

The product of the transition from what historians call "The Age of Faith" to "The Age of Reason," and one of the reasons Western civilization began to move rapidly was an increasing reliance on reason to determine the truth and an increasing distrust of other modes of truth seeking - religious revelation, emotion, imagination. It has served us well - mostly. If you have romantic illusions about the good old days, visit the International College of Surgeons Museum on Lake Shore Drive some day and see for yourself what it was like to be critically ill fifty years or a hundred years ago. Modern medicine regularly cures disease which was inevitably crippling or fatal little more than a generation ago. There is a fraternity/sorority of people walking around with artificial hips and knees who, a generation ago and all the time before that, would have been condemned to a lifetime of increasing pain, ultimate disability. There is a similar community of people walking around with artificial valves, by-passes, transplants - who, until a few years ago, would simply not be here. We can - see, hear, walk, run, live, move - have being more fully and much longer because Western civilization decided to go with reason instead of revelation, the scientific method rather than meditation, orthopedic surgery rather than faith-healing.

It has served us well - mostly. But since the beginning there has been a suspicion, even among those who wished to see civilization become more reasonable, that it may not make any more sense to allow reason to be the only arbiter of truth than it did to allow revelation or religion that absolute authority.

Pascal observed, "There are two equally dangerous extremes, to shut reason out, and to let nothing else in." [Pensees]

There is a wisdom which is not scientific per se. And there is a blindness which results when our devotion to rationality becomes absolute and unquestioned. There is no question about the fact that modern industrial capitalism, untouched by an older wisdom, unaffected by an older love for the earth, has brought us to the brink of ecological disaster. The smart bombs and the technology which allowed us to end the Gulf War quickly and efficiently also lured us into it and isolated us behind our TV screens from the appalling destruction of human life. And the same medical technology which enhances and saves life, extends life into that ethical minefield and excrutiatingly painful phase characterized by pumps and tubes and needles and bottles which simultaneously extends some times and also robs life of its final dignity and bankrupts the entire system.

There is, in fact, another way of comprehending reality, a more balanced way which appreciates human reason but also appreciates mystery; a way of seeking the truth which acknowledges that truth is always larger than the answers our methods produce: A way of talking about ultimate things, about God if you will, that acknowledges that God is always larger than the religions which attempt to define and describe God.

There is, that is to say, mystery; and what you do with mystery is not understand it, but stand before it with awe and wonder. Robert Farrar Capon in a book on the language of theology says that "we are so impressed by science that we feel we ought not to say the sunflower turns because it knows where the sun is. We are much more comfortable with a large vocabulary and when we are assured that the sunflower turns because it is heliotropic. The trouble with that kind of talk is that it tempts us to think we really know what this sunflower is up to. But we don't. The sunflower is a mystery, much as every simple thing in the universe is." [Hunting the Divine Fox, p. 10]

For several hundred years we have thought the task of education is to reduce mystery, eliminate the unknown. Now we are having second thoughts or perhaps education ought to teach appreciation for mystery, awe, maybe even reverence.

And Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel taught that "modern men and women fell into the trap of believing that everything can be explained, that reality is a simple affair that only has to be organized in order to be understood." [Walking on Water, Madeleine L' Engle, p. 131]

So we have trouble talking about God. Television and popular motion pictures treat religion as background material only. There is an occasional wedding or funeral, but the action is elsewhere and the participants, particularly clergy, are almost always trivialized. "Mash" used to deal regularly with questions of enormous complexity and importance. But the chaplain never quite gets it. Forty percent of the American people go to church or synagogue or mosque weekly, but you'd never know that if television and movies were your only access to American culture.

Norman Lear, whose programs in the past have addressed the major issues confronting our culture with intelligence and sensitivity, is producing a six-week series on CBS this summer on Sunday evenings called

"Sunday Dinner" in which one of the characters takes her religion seriously, prays and means it. In a preview of the series, The New York Times this morning called "spirituality" the last TV frontier. The network has agreed to "give God a chance." James Wall, editor of The Christian Century, quipped last week and Norman Lear himself said, and the Times quoted, "We have got to be willing to talk about God in this country. We've got to be willing to talk of awe, mystery, love." [The Christian Century, May 15-22, 1991.]

The evidence of spiritual hunger, longing for honest religion, is all about us. Motion pictures which hint at spirituality are widely popular even though they would not be described as traditionally religious. "Field of Dreams," for instance, is not only about baseball, but about mystery and transcendence and a way of looking at reality which is open to wonder and awe and faith.

Religion pops up in funny places. I had occasion to visit Yankee Stadium two weeks ago and was shown the memorial garden in center field where there are bronze plaques commemorating Yankee greats of the past - Ruth, Gehrig, Stengel, Dimaggio, Mantle - and in the center, two plaques as reminders of the transcendent, not of Yankee greats, not of Presidents of the United States, not even George Steinbrenner, but Pope Pius XII and John Paul II.

How then to speak of God in a way that acknowledges what time it is - 1991; the post-industrial, high-tech society; a way that acknowledges science and human reason, but which also knows about mystery?

The two passages of scripture which we read this morning are helpful.

The prophet Isaiah, was in the Temple, the place of worship, participating in a religious ritual. He had a vision - a powerful spiritual experience - described artfully by those flying seraphim and the shaking foundations and the voices, "Holy, Holy, Holy." The purpose of the experience, however, is to prompt the man to do something, to go to the people. That is, this prototype religious experience is not given for his entertainment or edification or spiritual satisfaction. Rather, experiences of God are given in order to prompt people to service. Note also Isaiah's first response, a feeling of personal diminishment: "Woe is me," he says. "I am a man of unclean lips." And there follows an experience of cleansing, acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation wholeness - healing.

In the passage from the Gospel of John, Nicodemus, a representative of the established religion of the day, comes to see Jesus at night to talk about God. His religion has taught him to understand God and God's will in terms of rules and regulations and rituals. Jesus is talking about a bigger God than that. He tells Nicodemus: "the wind," another word for which is spirit, "blows where it will." That is, God will not be contained by your religion. There is about God that which is always unpredictable, unrestrained, mysterious.

That is what Scripture suggests about the personal experience of God. God comes into individual lives for the purpose of transformation, not

entertainment. God comes to call people to service. God comes in ways we may not always comprehend or recognize; and God comes to bring wholeness, healing, forgiveness, health.

There is always an ultimate solitude about experiences of God. It is not easy to describe to another person one's personal experience of God.

Like human sexual behavior, there is enough mystery to make it difficult to communicate or describe or photograph. Unless treated with respect photographed sexuality can become pornographic. A similar dynamic can happen when we try to hear and graphically describe spiritual experience.

Rudolf Otto wrote a scholarly book in the 1920s which changed the way people think about religion and religious experience. Otto thought that all people have spiritual experiences but not all recognize them as the presence of God. I've always loved his description. He called it the "Mysterium Tremendum" and he wrote, "the feeling of it may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide, pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may burst in sudden eruption up from the depths of the soul with spasms or convulsions. It has its wild and demonic forms... It may become the hushed, trembling, speechless humility of the creature in the presence of - whom or what? In the presence of that which is a mystery inexpressible..." [The Idea of the Holy, p. 12]

So part of it is recognizing and acknowledging the presence of mystery in the middle of our lives - of surprising beauty and tenderness and love. Pay attention to the times when you have a tear in your eye and a lump in your throat, Fred Buechner advises. Don't be embarrassed when you are deeply and personally moved. Pay attention and be grateful for experiences of beauty and passion which are greater than you are and which are given to you as gifts of grace.

Be grateful, and in the words of the Psalmist, for the voice of God over the waters, in the crashing ocean surf or a misty still morning over Lake Michigan, or flashes of lightning and mighty oak trees and in still small moments of depth as you raise your eyes and spirit to the mystery of a night sky.

You may never have seen a six-winged seraphim, but you have seen and experienced miracles of healing and love and compassion and reconciliation.

The God about whom Jesus talked is as unpredictable as the wind, but can be counted on to be at work in the world and in your life - bringing peace and wholeness and growth and hope.

When you see that, you have seen what Isaiah saw - the six-winged Seraphim.

Peggy Shriver has published a new book of poems, many of them about God's surprising intrusion in the midst of life's harshness. One of them is about a homeless woman in a subway.

"She lurched aboard,
sagged into a vacant seat,
frail weight of her grey years
hunched with cold.

Numb fingers picked at rags
drawn close against raw misery,
Knuckles, cracked and swollen white,
clutched into a plea for warmth.

He, dark and lithe,
swung down the aisle,
taut jeans dancing
rhythmically.

With Latin grace
he, sidling past
her patient form,
in one smooth gesture

disappeared through subway doors
leaving in her lap
like folded dove wings,
his black leather gloves."
[Pinches of Salt]

The six-winged seraphim - the unfathomable mystery among us.

The job of the church is to keep alive the rumor of God.

And we, you and I, are invited to live with eyes and hearts and spirits open to the beauty and glory of God to rest in the promise and love of God who is among us in ways we can never fully understand.

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"Come down, O Love divine,
Seek out this soul of mine
And visit it with Your
ardor glowing..."

Amen.